

Respect, Reciprocity, and Reflection in the Classroom

by Theoni Soublis Smyth



It has been more than a decade since I first stepped into a classroom, yet I vividly remember all the emotions I experienced at that time: excitement, nervousness, apprehension, and anxiety. I was a first-year teacher, 21 years old, and assigned to a senior level British literature course. Yet, I survived. Not only did I survive, but I also remained a career educator—unlike many new teachers who leave the profession after 3–5 years (Woolfolk 2003). What made the difference for me? I attribute my successful evolution as a teacher to three

powerful instructional strategies: respect for diversity, the power of reciprocal learning, and personal reflection.

Respect for Diversity

Respecting diversity means addressing students' needs in the classroom, making the learning environment safe, and providing appropriate instruction to all students (Osler and Vincent 2002). The practices I incorporate in my classroom, I believe, are appropriate methods of creating a community of learners and helping students gain perspectives on their differences. One approach I use is the open forum discussion. In these discussions, students can voice their opinions about certain issues in a safe environment without fear of ridicule. In turn, they are expected to listen to perspectives that are different from their own.

All teachers have pivotal moments when they can open and encourage positive lines of communication. Often these are pop culture or media events, or highly polarized situations such as the death of a great leader, a close presidential election, or a highly publicized murder trial. For me, it was and always will be the O. J. Simpson trial of 1995. When the Simpson trial verdict came in, I was watching the CNN Live report in the classroom with a group of students. Their reactions varied from "this is a sham" and "this is so racist" to "thank the Lord" and "justice has been served." This pivotal moment was the perfect opportunity to open a discussion on race-related issues.

Initially, the conversation was rather chaotic. Everyone tried to talk at the same time. Students had their hands raised so high they were falling out of their seats. Soon the hand raising stopped and they simply started to scream at one

another. Though the class was not split equally in terms of race—five African-American students and 23 European-American students—the students seemed to be divided somewhat equally in their opinions about whether the verdict was based on race or truth.

I started to get nervous; I had lost control of my classroom. I picked up an ornamental gavel and slammed it on a table. When the students quieted down, I insisted on order in the classroom. As a believer of constructivist pedagogical theory, I asked students what rules they wanted to implement to ensure that a reasonable discussion takes place. They suggested: one speaker at a time, no talking while someone else is talking, and no one should be forced to talk. I added: no personal remarks toward anyone in the class and no vulgar language.

Unfortunately, I did not think about outlining consequences to these rules until four of them were broken within the first ten minutes. We again stopped the discussion to set consequences. The students proposed that if a rule was broken, the offending student could no longer participate in the conversation for that class period. Though I thought the rule was harsh, we adopted it because the students agreed on it. The transformation was incredible: instead of blurting out whatever came to mind, students stopped to think of consequences before speaking. A sense of community was growing. I saw sworn enemies hug one another after a heated debate, students befriend those who seemed an unlikely match, and tears turn into tools for healing.

According to Valerio (2001), a classroom is a "theatrical stage" that must be designed in advance to make students feel comfortable with their instructor, peers, and

environment. Among the seven elements of creating a safe classroom that Valerio (2001) outlined were preparation and creating a shared purpose. To prepare for tackling a difficult topic, Valerio (2001) suggested that teachers set the stage for learning by employing discussion groups, alternative methods of assessment, and flexibility. A shared sense of purpose stems from preparation. When students are encouraged to discover their commonalities, they can more easily bridge their differences.

The class created what Landau and Gathercoal (2000) termed judicious discipline: students first explore the personal freedoms granted by the U.S. Constitution, then move on to understand what living in a democracy entails, and finally learn approaches to govern their own behaviors. The open discussion forums gave students the opportunity to practice and discover these ideals on their own.

Our discussions were powerful because students trusted one another enough to feel safe in offering personal opinions and experiences. Together, we created an enjoyable environment that everyone appreciated. Students felt safe walking into my classroom and felt confident walking out. Safety meant that disparaging remarks were prohibited; racial, religious, and sexually oriented slurs were met with consequence; and dialogue between students was mandatory when frustration built or anger intensified

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(Beamon 2001; Daniel and Benton 1995). As teachers, we can't control what happens in a student's life at home, at work, or even in the hallway, but we can control what happens in our classrooms. If we can make students feel safe both physically and emotionally in our classrooms, then maybe we can make learning more intense and lasting.

"Through the support and encouragement of my students, I have come a long way."

Reciprocity of Learning

The learning process should be reciprocal. Over the years, while my students were learning academics and social awareness, I was learning lessons of my own. I learned patience when I realized my raised voice upset students and gave me a headache. I learned to be a better communicator because, despite the transformative power of books, literature was not always the most effective way for students to learn. I learned consistency because if, for example, one student received an extended deadline, all students expected the same treatment.

Yes, a formal education, ongoing professional development, and enthusiastic mentors shaped my philosophies about the art of teaching; but my students helped me best understand how meaningful learning occurs. Though I teach my students critical thinking skills, reading comprehension, and writing techniques, my students teach me how to continue thinking like a young adult, how to stay healthy and active, how to keep up with

technology, and why I should modify my curriculum to stay current with the changing times. Learning from my students not only keeps me thinking young, but also allows me to take knowledge from years past, reflect on it, and revise those beliefs into current teaching practices.

A reciprocal learning experience happened for me when a large box arrived at my classroom. My students

asked, "When are you going to open that box?" They asked that question every day for two months before I finally responded, "I don't think I want to. I can't use what's in there anyway." What was in the box? A brand new Apple computer. What was I supposed to do with a computer? The technology specialists at the school touted that it would help me keep accurate records (my records already were accurate), it would make creating handouts more efficient (I liked my typewriter), and it would allow me to average my grades twice during a marking period in a third of the time (now we are talking).

Though I understood that technology was supposed to be good for me, it did not make opening the box any easier. Finally, a student asked me whether I would let him look at what was in the box. I said okay, thinking to myself, "What is the worst that could happen?" I left the student alone while I went on my 32-minute lunch break. When I came back, there was a shiny, expensive looking, and intimidating

machine sitting on top of my desk. Nervously, I sat in my chair and actually contemplated whether to touch the keyboard. The student was kind and offered pointers. Much to my surprise, I soon was on my way to becoming a daily user of technology.

The opportunity to learn from my students has been a gift. Learning didn't happen fully, however, until I let down my guard, accepted that I never could know everything, was honest with my students and myself, and prepared myself for the learning journey. Ironically, more than a decade later, I now am the technology specialist in my department. I actually train preservice teachers on incorporating technology successfully into their future classrooms. Through the support and encouragement of my students, I have come a long way.

Reflection

I steadfastly believe that my growth and learning is the result of reflecting on my curriculum and instructional methods. Before I began my career, a veteran teacher recommended that I keep reflection logs of my experiences. These logs, she claimed, would be beneficial to me each year when I wanted to change or modify my courses. My reflection log has become my diary. I write down everything that happens to me as a teacher. I log classroom conversations, student conferences, ideas for improving lesson plans, and discussions with administrators and parents.

This tool is invaluable to me. It represents day-to-day, year-to-year documentation of my teaching career. The record is utilitarian on several levels. Before introducing a new unit, I refer to the notes I wrote in the log the previous year, including tips to remember, ideas

for improvement, and students' suggestions. From my notes, I get helpful insights on what worked well and what went wrong.

Another reason the log is important is for legal documentation of classroom activities. One year, the log got me out of a sticky situation in which a student's parents threatened to file a lawsuit against me for not informing them that their child was in jeopardy of failing my course. I documented that I tried calling the parents on three occasions and left messages on an answering machine each time. When I did not receive responses to my calls, I sent a letter to the student's home. After producing documentation, including a copy of the letter, the threat of a lawsuit disappeared.

Finally, my reflection log is a personal history of my professional career and a significant document that details my evolution as a teacher.

Concluding Thoughts

Though details and events will vary from classroom to classroom, I believe that respecting diversity and developing safe classroom environments, learning from our students, and reflecting on our teaching are effective practices for any teaching situation. The experiences I have shared with my students have shaped my teaching. Through teaching respect for diversity, I continue to broaden my own perspectives and hope to influence future teachers to do

the same. I will continue to learn from my students by remaining open to their opinions, thoughts, and beliefs. Reflecting on my teaching practices has given me the strength to continue evolving as an educator. 

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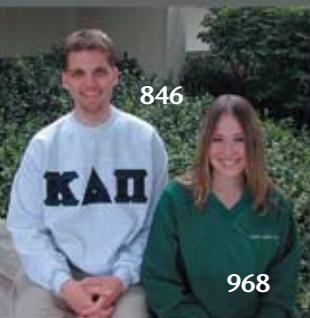
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